The Forest of Memento

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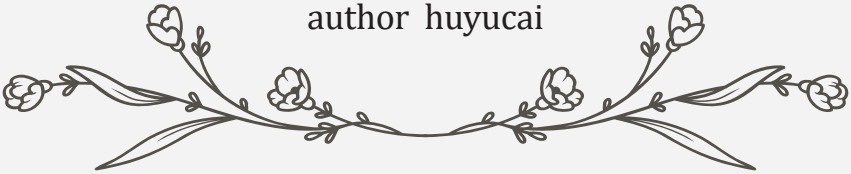

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The forest was intimidatingly vast.
Tall and thick trees obscured the sky, making it perpetually dark.
Weeds grew haphazardly, so fat insects buzzed within it.
On days when someone accidentally entered the forest,
a thick fog always seemed to block their vision,
causing them to lose their way.

However, no one came here voluntarily.

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As the sun began to set, the boy crouched beneath the dining table. He was a boy, standing at a height of 129 centimeters without shoes. His under eyes were flushed, but his complexion was pale noticeably. He huddled his small frame even smaller, peering through tattered cloth with intense focus. Occasionally, if the shadow moved slowly beyond the white tablecloth, he would record its movement in his notebook. And he held his breath frequently, making sure the owner of the shadow could not recognize him. After a while, his feet began to itch gradually. Since leaving the house, he had become anxious about not being able to use the bathroom.

When the boy finally crawled out, stretching his numb legs. There was no one around. It was eerily quiet to the point where his ears felt clogged. However, it's in such silent, empty places that a woman always reveals herself.

“Master.”

The voice was calling him. The calling was as gentle as the wind, yet it held a distinct urgency as if grabbing hold of something within him. Startled, he turned around.
In the darkness, the silhouette of a woman emerged. She wore a loosed pale apron and a pointed bonnet, the kind person might expect to see on a maid in such an old mansion. However, the boy trembled as if he had seen something unsettling.

"I have prepared breakfast for you.“

The woman passed by the crouched boy within her own shadow, she just placed the plate she held onto the dining table. On the plate, there was only a single cup of tea, and even that had an odd color as if it had been brewed from filthy water. The boy, upon seeing the viscous liquid with swimming maggots, took a breath and had the dry heaves covering his mouth in disgust.

What is ‘that.’ It was a brief conversation, but the boy was exhausted, he had just experienced a long nightmare.

"I… I can't drink this. Please take it away."

Said the boy, lowered his head finding something dreadful to even look at. It was a struggle to utter those words, his voice trembled strangely. Although the boy kept his head down, so unable to see the woman. The woman gazed at him without blinking. Then, sensing the boy's glance, she lifted her head. Revealed her crescent-shaped eyes, and smiled.

"Is that so… that's a shame." The woman said.
The woman took the teacup and plate in her hands, turned around once again. For a moment, her long skirt billowed. As she walked away slowly, the corridor behind her was pitch black, without a single candle, making it seem as if she was slowly merging and disappearing into the darkness.

What is 'that.' It was a brief conversation, but the boy was exhausted, he had just experienced a long nightmare.

A week ago, to celebrate his sixth birthday, the boy went on a trip to an ancient archaeological site with his parents. The destination the boy chose was all rugged and challenging, causing him to quickly become lost just by letting go of his parents' hands. However, the boy, who usually enjoyed adventures, seemed to relish its situation and headed in various directions as if he had encountered the very scenario he had longed for.

Among them, in one direction, he suddenly saw several crows flying vigorously into the sky at irregular heights. Toward the direction of the crows soaring, there was a single pillar standing tall. It was a mistake to head in that direction.

Pushing through the overgrown grass hidden by bent trees, the boy soon came across a humble temple. Up close, it was a modest space with stone pillars and a high ceiling. However, the reason he suspected it to be a temple was that there was a woman lying in the center. It was a bright day and the place was opening all around, her figure was visible from a distance. The boy cautiously looked around a few times before approaching the altar.

As he stepped onto the low stone steps, a shiver ran down his spine. When he saw the woman's form, strangely, even though he was very close, her facial features did not come into focus.

At first, he thought it was a woman, but now, on closer inspection, the figure appeared to be a man. At times, it seemed as if it was a newborn, and then it looked like the aged. However, after staring for a while, it became clear that it was indeed a woman. She lay straight on the hard marble, wearing a wrinkled white garment that resembled pajamas, with brown hair gathered above her chest, her hands clasped on top. She looked like a woman straight out of a fairy tale.

Just as her features were fully recognized in his mind, the woman opened her eyes. Dark sapphire eyes that framed her disheveled hair locked onto his gaze. When their eyes finally met, the boy was so startled that he let out a scream. He felt as though if he stayed there, the enigmatic woman might grab hold of him. So without looking back, he started to run.

The boy, in a hurry, escaped and went straight back home to his parents. But the woman appeared in front of him several times. To keep this a secret from his parents, the boy brought her to “an old mansion.” The place was an old building that had been passed down from his grandfather to his father, long abandoned and on the verge of collapsing, looking shabby and dirty. The boy's parents had long forgotten about the existence of that place, making it a suitable hideaway for the child to claim as his own secret base. With an excited heart, the boy named the building his ‘retreat.’

"This is where you will be living from now on," the boy said, panting heavily after walking a long distance on the narrow path. In contrast, the woman showed no signs of sweating, not a single drop on her brow.

"Is this where I will be living?" She asked.

“Yes… you just call me ‘master.’ Then you will listen to what I say, right…?”
The boy said.

Does that mean… this is my home?" She asked boy again.

As the boy nodded hesitantly, the woman glanced around the mansion with an indifferent gaze. The mansion had a half-covered roof with dead ivy, worn and broken black walls, and inside, hundreds of mice and insects scurrying around. The boy was certain that he was in for a difficult time.

“I like here.”

However, when the woman turned to look at the boy, her face was quite gentle. And there was a clear, but strange affection on her smile.

The next day, when the boy returned to the retreat, the woman greeted him dressed as a maid, ready to serve the young master. Other than that, there were no noticeable changes. But overnight, she had completely blended into the mansion as one of its residents. She took pride in it, claiming she had wandered around the mansion all night without closing her eyes once.

"I'm going to grow the Venus Flytrap here. I will trim the overgrown weeds, plant plenty of Cephalotus. And when the cold rainy season comes, I will grow Heliamphora. It's nice to have a home. Thank you, master, for giving me a place to be,"
she said gratefully.

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As the sun set completely and darkness fell, the boy looked out of the window. scraggy and damp branches swayed in the wind, and lightning flashed in the dark sky. "Oh, it looks like rain," the boy thought. If he didn't return by tomorrow, everyone would be worried. He stepped back from the filled with moisture window and thought of his dormitory, which was far away.

“Tonight is falling, how about spending the night here.”

The woman's voice could be heard from behind. In the crimson light of the candles, her smile appeared even more enigmatic. The boy responded with an anxious
gesture, like fidgeting with his gloves or clearing his throat unnecessarily.

“Oh, um. Then I will take your hospitality, Miss Maid. By the way, is there a bedroom or something similar place in here?"

"Of course. If there's a floor, You can lay your body anywhere. Fufu… just kidding. There's a bed inside……."

The woman watched the anxious boy for a moment. And then, as thunder rumbled, she began to walk, signaling him to follow. The boy carefully followed her, fearing that the old, rotten wooden floor might give way. In this light, the mansion's walls, all made of dark wood, looked incredibly gloomy. The bedroom they arrived at had a faint musty smell and as the woman lit a lantern, the boy sneezed from the dust floating in the air. There was a tall bed, but the thought of the possible pile of insects underneath made it impossible for him to lie down easily.

"Would the bed be uncomfortable for you?" the woman asked, leaning in close to the boy. Her voice was so soft like a whisper, that the boy blushed and pressed his hot cheek.

"No… it's enough," the boy replied.

Thanks to the windows tightly closed in several layers, the sound of thunder seemed distant. But it appeared that the rain would continue throughout the night.
Due to the dust piled on his bed, the boy rubbed his eyes several times. In her eyes, it seemed like the boy was throwing a little tantrum. She had lit a candle by the door earlier, but lying down, the light didn't reach him at all. In the darkness, he gazed at the woman's face waiting for him to fall asleep. She still wore a smile, and as he thought of his mother in his young heart. Perhaps due to the sudden drowsiness, the boy suddenly found her less frightening than before.

“Miss Maid, what are you….” The boy began in a voice that had lost its caution, and the woman narrowed her eyes and brought her face closer to his.

"Please don't ask me what I am," the woman said. Her gaze was so deep and gentle that it seemed devoid of any deceit or malice. Even he could feel her strange affection towards him.

"Which you need to remember is only one thing." One thing…? To the boy followed her words like a child, she said with a smile.

“Even for people like us will face death someday.”

That night, the boy had a strange dream. It was quite unusual. The place was the mansion he had seen several times before, but there were plants with tooth licking their lips growing all around. Perhaps because of this, the air around was excessively humid and heavy, and his skin felt damp, like soaked in water. Eventually, the woman appeared. It wasn't unusual. The woman always appeared by his side whether he wanted it or not. The boy felt her approach and sensed her wax-like hands on his shoulders, followed by them encircling his cheeks. Her hands were so cold that his own body felt as hot as when he had a fever.

“Wait, my parents watch us….”

The boy pushed the woman away with his feverish hand. However, it was not just vehement rejection, but simply an action born out of shyness.

His own pale, round, and damp fingertips were trembling as if they might melt at any moment.

“Don’t worry, they already in death.”

When the woman kissed him, the boy shuddered. Her lips were too soft, and their eeriness sent shivers through his entire body. He felt like he had fallen into a deep Nepenthes, gasping for breath in the hot and sweet air. As he blinked in it, the woman's eyelashes brushed against him like feathers. He felt her swallowing saliva. Her long breaths, the boy was slowly choking in time with it. It was just like when he kissed her in the darkness. In that darkness, there was a life, form, taste, and warmth.
It’s good for burying his body. His breathing was becoming more erratic. His body melted, embraced by the boliling darkness. The soft floor, the carnivorous plants opening it mouths, and their deceased parents behind us.
All their forms gradually fading away…….

As morning dawned once more, the young man left the retreat with the maid seeing him off. The rain from the night had cleansed the air, but it didn't sit well with him. A single droplet fell on his forehead. The trees, drenched from the rain, were bending its back heavily. The young man made his way as quickly as possible, towing his bicycle down the long and bumpy forest path. Feeling the splashes of mud at his pant cuffs, he thought to himself that since the forest was so deep, it would probably be another ten years before he returned.

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Afterward, clear days continued for a while. The young man, on such days when the sun shone, would retrieve the antiques he had tucked away under the bookshelf, meticulously dust them off one by one, and arrange them by the window.
In his younger days, these items used to adorn the display shelves, but as he grew older and his pin money increased, the things he had once proudly called collectibles had turned into mere odds and ends. The young man earned his degree in social education this year. At first, he pursued the field as a talent he had nurtured since childhood out of curiosity. However, despite his earnest efforts, the results were not as promising. For several years of intense study, he had been plagued by a persistent sense of fatigue. Even when engaging in conversations with various people or observing the same things, he always felt inherently different from others, as if he were alienated from the crowd. Perhaps it was because his heart couldn't bear to leave the retreat.
The young man's life always appeared smooth, but somewhere within, there was always a lurking darkness, making it seem perpetually precarious.

Perhaps there was a woman who found charm in that aspect of him. She was often a girl two years younger than him, attending the same classes. To greet him, she would come out of the building exactly ten minutes early and wait for the young man to emerge. She was not poverty-stricken but not overly extravagant either. And like many young women, she often displayed a certain coyness. Whenever the young man encountered her, he thought, 'She appears quite ordinary from any angle,' but he found that very ordinariness appealing.

The day after graduating from college, the young man decided to get married to the woman. As he settled into a routine life, with homemade meals, societal expectations and norms that come with marriage, and a familiar intimacy with his stable partner, he believed that he would gradually adopt the same ethical standards as everyone else and be able to reshape his own rules.
After the midday wedding ceremony, the young man stepped outside to the edge of the balustrade and let the breeze wash over him. It was undoubtedly the significant moments of his life, as everyone would say.
But in his mind, it felt hazy, like dreaming.

Soon, the young man's father approached him, who had lost weight due to chronic illness. And the two exchanged greetings filled with celebration and appreciation for each other's efforts.

"Do you still visit that mansion these days?" Suddenly, the father inquired about the mansion. He hadn't discussed the mansion with his father for a long time, but the young man immediately knew which place he was referring to.

"No one has lived there for a long time. I can use it as I please without any issues," the young man replied.

"But the forest around that mansion is just too vast and treacherous. It's not a suitable place to stay. Now that you become a patriach of the family. So you should quit the hobby of wandering around dangerous places," his father said.

Fortunately, his father's tone resembled that of scolding a misbehaving child who couldn't quit a misdeed. The young man knew that his father was aware of his ventures into the forest, but he had no idea about the terrible things that had transpired there or how deeply his son was entangled with it. As he contemplated this, the enormous secret that had between him and his parents, and his own sense of elief in that, felt horrifying and shameful. The father now appeared older and smaller than the last time they had met.

Before his father could consider him too peculiar, the young man nodded to him. Shortly after he had started working as a professor at the university, his father became ill and eventually passed away. He never managed to uncover his son's secret. The funeral proceeded too quickly to adequately comfort the years of his father's life.
They burned dozens of incenses simultaneously, filling the indoor air like early morning mist. The young man had initially resisted, but as his father's only son, he looked beyond the white anonymous cloth in the end. His familiar father's face was growing pale and cold.
Even when he tried to look away from the body and focus elsewhere, there were so many people that he inevitably made eye contact with someone.

The hazy light of flickering candles in the smoke, people dressed in black, and the gaze that seemed to silently reproach him. It was his father who had passed away, but the young man felt as if he were in the afterlife himself.

When he came to his senses, the young man was walking towards the retreat. There wasn't a significant reason for it. Before honoring his promise with his father, he wanted to check on the woman one last time. The retreat had already aged, so there were no noticeable changes. The air had been clean when he was in the forest, but as he entered the retreat, the air grew heavy once again. However, the man found the retreat's fustiness strangely comforting, as he had come to dislike the feeling of the pure air washing over him.

"Good afternoon, master," she greeted.

The moment the man saw her, his whole body shuddered. She appeared exactly as he remembered her from his memories—the terror of gentle and eerie. For a long time, he had regarded those emotions as childhood illusions, but the casualness of her demeanor upon meeting again brought those feelings back to him clearly.

"Did you come running away because your mother would scold you again?" she asked.

"What?" The man lowered his head for a moment, then his eyes widened in response to her words.

"No, I won't. That's silly," he replied, initially expressing annoyance but then his nose seemed to twitch for some reason. The man pressed his reddened eyes and sat down on the dusty sofa. As he coughed due to the rising dust, he couldn't help but think that it was probably the cause of his recent teary outburst. Fufu, the woman chuckled softly. It wasn't anything particularly special, but with sitting on the sofa, her face was not visible, making the meaning of her laughter unclear.

"What's so funny?" He asked.
"Nothing." She said.

Of course, she wasn't mocking her master. She might have appeared mature on the surface, but in reality, she was as much like a newborn as someone who knew nothing of the outside world. As a baby doesn't care about parents' reactions when crying or laughing, for her, laughter was just a natural occurrence. Much like when the lights come on after becoming accustomed to darkness, and one furrows their brow.
The young man was aware of this, but even that laughter sounded like the memory from his childhood, so he pretended not to notice. Because the young man was a boy no longer. He had grown much taller, and his voice had deepened. It was because there had been his father's funeral today. And now he had left the house he had lived in for so long and had his own home.

The woman placed her cold hand on the man's cheek. Like made of urethane, Her fingers felt lifeless and rigid. The young man was led by her touch to raise his head. In an instant, between their distance closed, and as he held his breath in silence, he could hear her breathing. There was a faint sweetness on her breath. And before he closed his eyes, she saw him once again. Indeed, she was smiling.

"Come to think of it, master, you're gradually losing your baby teeth as well," she remarked.

The Feelings of that time. Abstractly saying, it was a fear that tore through the depths of his being. It was a sensation of shedding one's human facade and becoming a screaming beast, and indulging in carnal desires and satisfaction with whatever was in front of it. When he came to his senses, the man found himself back at home. It was a time just slightly past noon, under the languid shadow of the setting sun. At first, he felt a sense of peace, as if savoring the remnants of a dream. However, the subsequent recollection of memories made him increasingly uneasy. At the end of that unease, his mother’s face came to his mind strangely.

His mother was too prim and precise. She laughed frequently, but her laughter always seemed to be directed towards people outside the family. He had never seen her expressed emotions otherwise. Occasionally, she would vent her frustration at foolish and crude neighbors, but that was about it.

While there were no significant events between the couple, her indifferent gaze always seemed to shift from her husband. And eventually it settled on her son, who was beyond. The young man had wondered how such a mother, who was like that, had formed a relationship with his father and given birth to him since he was a boy.

Upon reflection, his mother always did everything in a disciplined manner and hoped that her son would always be within those rules. The young man had always acted as his mother had taught him. He acted bediently or timidly sometime, but he had never really questioned how he felt about it. Nevertheless, he had continued to live according to his mother's commands.

She opposed her son learning a trade and encouraged him to enroll in university by any means necessary. The person who recommended that he pursue a degree and work as a professor at a city university? It was also his mother. That's why he went to the retreat back then. He didn't like being alone with his mother in the house without his father. He was afraid of his mother evaluating him as he is now and her uttering cold words…….

The young man jarred his teeth loss and grabbed his head. He squeezed it as if trying to shake off these thoughts. He was trembling heavily, and his breathing was irregular, which felt odd. He mulled over what 'the woman' had said. There was no doubt that he appeared as nothing more than a helpless child in her eyes. The child squirming in discomfort. It was the very thing the man had wanted to deny the most.

He leaned against the wall, opened the door, and stepped outside. Rose-patterned wallpaper and lanterns that illuminated the hallway brightly even when there was no one there. His mother's touch was evident in this house as well. The man entered the main room as quietly as possible, trying to stifle any noise.

There, a woman with light brown hair was lying down. her body slightly curled up. The woman's eyes were formal but warm, just waking up from sleep. Still, his wife was a woman he had chosen himself. He looked at her back from behind.

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After realizing dissatisfaction and despair, the man changed. He drank alcohol every day which he had never touched before and lay on a soft chair with his back firmly against it. And as he stared at the spinning ceiling, he wondered. 'Where did my life go wrong?

“Oh, man. Why haven't I been able to get in touch with you? I asked your work, and they said you haven't been attending classes for a whole month. Is that true?”

Then one day, the man's friend came to visit. While it was certainly something to be grateful for that he had a friend who would come looking for him even in this state. However, the man was still intoxicated, gazing at everything he could see.

“That's true perhaps. But… I didn't realize so much time had passed," the man said.
"Drinking in such dimly lit places, it's no wonder you lost track of time," the friend replied.

He just stepped into the dirty room, pulled back the curtain, and swiftly opened the window. The man winced as the sudden light entered. The lukewarm air of early autumn filled his lungs, but the unfamiliarity of the light and warmth made him cough, like a sick person.

"Did you come here on purpose to say such things?"

"Then do I think I came here just to chat idly?
Things aren't the same as they were in our days. A slight misstep can tarnish your reputation. Even I've heard rumors that you've gone off the deep end with some cult, and it's starting to influence the students," he said.

"What…?” At his statement, the man slowly rose from his heavy posture. In the harsh light, his haggard appearance became more apparent. His unshaven beard felt coarse as he absentmindedly touched his sore jaw.

"That’s silly rumors," the man furrowed his brow in usual, appealing his annoyance. However, the man in front of him remained unfazed and answered without a hint of hesitation.

"Are you certain that it's not true?"

His voice was steady, with a subtle hint of righteousness, making his conviction unmistakable. Without a doubt, he held ill intentions toward me. In his blurred mind, the man felt certain of this and gazed at his friend, who was now bathed in the yellow light streaming in from outside, illuminating him from all sides.

"Listen, it's all for your own good," the friend said.

"No, I won't listen," Why should I listen this? He wanted to say, but his voice refused to cooperate. His dry lips trembled, and his pupils dilated like those of a wild beast. Red veins bulged in his bloodshot eyes. The room remained the same, yet as he rolled his eyes in all directions, he saw nothing. The man's vision blurred and darkened in an instant.

"You've become strange!"

Ssshh…. Amidst the sharp sound of his own breath, that single sentence passed through the man's brain like a blow. A thin tremor coursed down his spine, and he twisted body as if he had been hunted. Now, even the sound of his own breathing seemed distant. The surrounding darkness seemed to engulf his eyes and ears completely, rendering everything black. And then, thunder roared.

The windows tightly closed in several layers, making it sound distant.
But there was no mistaking it, it was thunder. I heard the weather had been clear for a while…….

The falling rain noise filled his mind before gradually fading away. What followed was the sound of his own heartbeat. The senses that had receded into the background began to sharpen one by one. Now, thousands of sensations that made up his body were passing through him.

Finally, when his vision cleared, there was no one in the room. The thick curtains fluttered gently in the breeze that flowed through the wide-open window. The dust dancing in the room caught the sunlight and sparkled, twinkling.

He walked slowly and looked out the window. There someone lay lifeless on the ground below. He couldn't immediately recognize who is he. Because their silhouette was entirely red and there was a single crack in his head.
The yellow light of early autumn still bathed him. Sirens wailed soon, and police officers gathered around the area.
Someone outside the room called the man's name and knocked on the door.

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It was the first time the man had faced his mother since the day of his father's funeral. The meeting was intended to discuss his murder charge. Seeing his mother after such a long time, she appeared distant, perhaps even indifferent to thos case. However, she stared at the suspect's photo in the newspaper more intently than at her own son in front of her for a while.

"Let's say it was due to your mental disorder."

As if pulling a knife from her mouth, his mother, who had been holding her breath sharply, finally spoke.

"You were heavily intoxicated, and there were issues with your mental state," she said.

"I didn't kill him, Mother. I'm even not crazy," he insisted.

He raised his head, which had been lowered. And looked directly at his mother's face. She seemed much smaller now compared to when he had glanced at her. She bit her lip and looked up at him. From his perspective, there was no emotion to be read in those eyes.

"He died alone, himself……. I don't remember killing him. Do you want to make me into a murderer, a lunatic?"

The man almost pleaded, his voice filled with the imminent threat of tears. His mother didn't respond immediately.
Her expression seemed to reflect the turmoil and emotions in the man, appearing pained. Then a sigh escaped her thin lips.
She was trembling. The complex gaze on her eyes was vanished and had once felt cold now burned with an unexpected intensity. It wasn't the gaze of a complete stranger, but it wasn't the eyes of a loving mother either.
It was, quite literally, the disdainful eyes one might use when looking at a lunatic or a murderer.

“I…….”

The composed voice of his mother was trembling. Had her skin always been this dark? It appeared almost reddish, as if the blood had rushed to the surface. Even in the man's distorted gaze, haunted by memories of his childhood, it was clear that she was undeniably angry. But this couldn't be. His mother was a rational one.
She had remained stoic even on the day his father died, showing no emotions, a person who was seemingly devoid of feelings.

“I shouldn’t give birth to you.”

A single tear rolled down to her swollen reddened eyes. It felt like the world had stopped. No words came to mind. Recalling the countless moments when he had became the victim, the man felt like he had fallen into a giant aquarium, and that delusion slowly drown him.

The man pushed way out like escaping the place. At one point, it seemed like he heard his mother's calling to him, but he didn't respond. He just started the car's engine.
It was the end. He vowed that he would never see her again for the rest of his life.

***

The man had always dreamed of parting with his mother and achieving complete independence at any moment. However, he never imagined that it would unfold in such a manner. As he returned home, he wonder if he had been abandoned by his mother or if he had simply fled from her.

Upon arriving home, the wife greeted him d at the entrance. She had been the one to persuade him to meet his mother, so she was hoping that he had brought back the answers she desired.
However, on the other hand, she couldn't hide her anxiety, as she stood there in her disheveled nightclothes with an anxious look in her bloodshot eyes. To a stranger, she might have appeared to be a serious case.
With her gaunt, parched lips and a facial expression that seemed to bear the weight of countless hardships endured alone. The man found himself disliking the look on her face, a look that seemed to convey fury as they exchanged glances without speaking about his meeting with his mother. The air between them crackled with tension, a harbinger of an impending, significant argument.

"You have to understand," the wife said with a deep unhappiness. Her words only fueled his frustration further. The man had spent his entire life listening to the opinions of others, and he wanted, to stand tall and live freely in his own home at the very last. However, it was difficult to contain his anger when the woman he had carefully chosen, someone he considered ‘ordinary,’ was blaming him and behaving strangely.

"You want me to understand? You are asking me to give up my life for you right now." He said.

"Yes, is that too much to ask?" She replied.

"You crazy!" There was a sharp slap, a sound that echoed through the air. The man had impulsively struck his wife's cheek with his hand. It was the first time he had ever raised a hand against someone, and he swallowed hard.

But she remained utterly unfazed. As if she had anticipated that something like this would eventually happen, she stared back at her husband with trembling body, watching over herself with a sense of apprehension.

The commotion made the baby cry. She was the treasure wrapped in a soft blanket, belonging to the two of them. With the sharp sound of the baby crying, the man finally seemed to regain his clarity of mind.

"I know you had dreams. But now is the time to let go. If you ever loved me, just stay here with me. This home needs you…."

The crying grew louder. The bed was in a far corner so the man couldn't see his infant. He glanced around the dimly lit room and slowly raised his hand to his wife's shoulder.

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Since the day I first set foot in that old retreat, I've felt like my heart has been floating on the fact that I had a secret no one else would ever know. So, even though I may have been part of a community, I've always drawn a line between myself and people, treating myself as an outsider in every moment. Did I have dreams?
No, I never thought of wanting to do something myself. But if I appeared that way in my wife's eyes, it must have been because there was undoubtedly something in one corner of my heart, something I longed for and yearned for….

"It's time for dinner."

The maid placed another plate in front of the man once more. On the plate lay the lifeless body of squirrel, its fur stiffened and coated with dark red blood, with traces of the hunt still visible.
The man locked eyes with the squirrels bloodied, twitching corpse. And raised his knife. A ghostly, winged shadow flitted above the its slender neck. He began to cut through the tough meat and brought it to his lips, but he couldn't bear it and ended up retching it out.

"Oh dear, it seems you've lost your appetite. Did something happen during the day?" The maid asked.

“It's not that. I injured my eyes. That's why I can't hold a fork. But I…
I can't blame her. My wounds will heal someday, but the emotional ones I've caused her will never heal.“

The hot liquid he had vomited splattered onto the maid's apron. The acrid smell of gastric juice hung heavily in the air, resonating throughout the room.

"It seems to me that your wounds may never heal either, sir. But don't worry. I'll hold it for you," the maid said.

The woman gently wrapped her fingers around the man's hand and held the fork for him. The glove was slick with the yellowish bile, but she didn't seem to mind.
The man opened his eyes widely and looked at her, capturing her in his gaze. The sun was about to set. The bright twilight painted the room in a fiery orange hue.

Feeling the trembling that had once enveloped his body now completely subsiding, the man grasped the woman's slender wrist.
He could hear the sound of a pulse. Perhaps it was the indication of his fate, with the contents of his stomach swirling around and staining her pristine white apron, a reminder of his impending destiny. The man lifted his head.

“Ah, thank you.”

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His wife referred to the man's collection as 'rocks'. Not only her choice of words but in her gaze too, were as cold as when she looked at something of no value.
The man, aware of her gaze, muttered aloud in a loud voice.
“Of course, until you study them, they're just ordinary rocks. But when you invest time and effort, you discover their value, and they become collectibles from that moment on.” To this, his wife questioned what would happen if you couldn't find any value, despite all the effort.
The man hesitated for a moment, then replied that there are those who can find something even in that. In response, his wife shook her head with a bitter expression. Even if there are such people, it's not you. Everything you do is just a waste of time, she said cynically.

Late at night, the man awoke to his wife's summons. Following her call, he descended to the first floor, where his daughter and wife sat side by side, both wearing unhappy expressions. The atmosphere was heavy and silent. A foreboding sense of dread seized the man. Having experienced misfortunes in the past countlessly, he had become sensitive to such eerie feelings.

"There's a man she want to marry."

"Divorce me," his wife said, after hesitating as if she feared something, finally letting her feelings slip. "What? This is the first time I've heard anything like this," the man chuckled, as if he had heard a poorly delivered joke. One of them hoped the other would join in the laughter, but nobody did. The man didn't meet anyone's eyes. It was only then that he realized the atomsphere.

"No, don't. Don't joke about it. She's barely eighteen now. She hasn't even go to school properly, what does she know about?"
The man said with serious tone.

"That's probably because you didn't show much interest in our family."

His wife still avoided meeting the man's eyes, but she trembled as if she feared him. However, when she spoke again, the man realized that her voice trembled not just with fear. It's trembled with long-standing sorrow and a firm rage.

"The only reason we lived under the roof was for our child. Now that she doesn't need our home, then our relationship ends here," his wife declared.

The man recalled the almost constant moments when he felt like a victim. He remembered the day he realized his seemingly ordinary wife was a 'strange' woman and the day he decided to accept it and continue living. However, this time, he couldn't bring himself to accept it. And he stared at his wife hoping to find some answer there, as if this prolonged eye contact might grant him another chance. But his wife kept avoiding to meet his gaze.

"Father," someone called the man. His daughter's face appeared unfamiliar, like a woman he had never seen before. He couldn't recognize her
until she called out to him.

"Don't you understand yet, father?
We don't want to stay in this house anymore. Don't make it harder for Mom anymore. I've been unhappy enough because of you!" his daughter exclaimed.

Her quivering voice trailed off into sobs.

"Please, let us live for the people we love now," his daughter implored.
The man initially braced himself for the righteous anger that felt like a knife ready to be thrust into him. But instead, he simply lowered his head. In that moment, he realized how he was perceived as a human being where he stood.
It was deeply unsettling and wrong for him, but as he felt his daughter's tears as the sorrow of a stranger, he had to come to terms with his own wrongdoing.

The man slowly placed his hand on his wife's shoulder, aware that even his own hand trembled with fear and a considerable sense of reluctance. Gradually, his wife's shoulder started trembling as well.
Her face, her eyes that were neither large nor small, and her skin, grown more wrinkled in their unfamiliarity. She was just an ordinary woman, more normal than abnormal.
The strange one was me.

"You've never loved me, not even once," she said.

The man lowered his hand from her shoulder.

"…Yea. It seems so," he replied.

The man bid them farewell without shedding a single tear. Although it was still night, it seemed that dawn would break by the time they arrived at their new home.

After seeing them off, the man wandered through his empty house. The house was his now, but there was no one else besides him. He was left alone.

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He stayed up all night. And when the dawn broke, the man left his house. He walked a long-forgotten path, and eventually, he reached a densely wooded area. There, he abandoned his car, which was running out of gas, and ventured into the forest. The forest was intimidatingly vast.
Tall and thick trees obscured the sky, making it perpetually dark. Weeds grew haphazardly, so fat insects buzzed within it. On days when someone accidentally entered the forest, a thick fog always seemed to block their vision, causing them to lose their way. So no one came here voluntarily.

He arrived at a retreat after passing through the forest. The retreat looked even more shabby and worn. With a gray beam of light spewing through the menacing clouds, it's illuminating the entrance that had appeared dark in the morning's white light.
In the midst of it all, a woman stood like elongated tall and slender plant. She slowly raised her head and looked at the man. Her face was almost unrecognizable in the backlight, with mysterious, no, a stone-like countenance.

"Welcome, master."

The man sensed that she had transformed once again, from an ethereal and unfamiliar presence to a gentle maid. And he handed his coat to her. There was a brief moment of puzzlement in her expression as she received the coat.

"Isn't it too big to handle with just one hand now?" The man remarked.

When the maid raised her head again to look at her master, he had into a middle-aged man. The maid gazed at him with wide dilated pupils with dark eyes. He had grown so tall now that she had to look up to see him.

"I've grown too old. I'm nearing the end of my life.
But during all these long, all I did was commit sins. Perhaps I'll have to continue living, repenting for my sins until the day I die," he said.

She remained silent for a moment. She gazed absentmindedly at the morning sunlight streaming through the curtains into the foyer.

Then she gently smiled. It was a smile that uncomfortably normalized the relationship between the two that had been ongoing since his childhood, making it seem like a matter of course.
The man briefly thought that her subtle smile was not much different from his wife's, but he quickly erased the woman's face from his head.

"Children grow up so quickly. That's why you've returned at this time.
I appreciate you remembering what I said last night," he remarked.

He began to say. "Yes, that's right. I won't ask what you are. But I….”

And then the woman embraced the man. From her wrist came the faint sound of a pulsating heartbeat like extended the roots of a plant.
There was the peculiar scent of things long past. The nauseating and bitter smell, mixed with the warm, sweet aroma of a newborn infant emanating from her. The man frozen in there, staring at her slender neck.

Thump, thump. Beyond the swelling horizon, memories of days gone by resurfaced. Even though the face that emerged from those memories was his own, it still felt unfamiliar. It was now just a part of the past. The man shut his eyes and held her close.

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The man stood still, gazing out of the window. The window was cracked and dusty, making it difficult to see the outside scenery. Occasionally, the shifting of clouds cast fleeting shadows. The maid approached slowly, offering a cup of tea to her master.
The tea inside still had a strange color, and there were small maggots floating in the thick concoction. The man accepted the teacup with a nonchalant expression.

"Can I assume you've made up your mind?"

The woman gazed at him quietly. In this moment, her eyes resembled that of a young child, and newborn even beyond.
Eyes that hadn't witnessed anything yet, but could hold anything within them.
The man took one last glance at the light streaming through the window before turning away.

"Indeed. If this is enough to forget the forest that once stood in the way of this mansion, I can do as much as needed."

He moved his finger to tilt the teacup. It helped to cleanse his gums and throat wiping away the slippery muck and allowing it to flow through his veins. From the root of his tongue, he brushed away the sweetness trickling down his small mouth.

As he pulled his mouth away and looked down into the teacup, the boy was smiling back at him, reflected in the gleaming black liquid.

"As expected, the tea you brewed is exceptional."

The Forest
of Memento